All in a flap – tips for nailing wing flaps

A wildlife photography technique article by Martin Sneary

Wing flaps are one of those really cool looking shots, turning a standard picture of a duck bobbing about on the water’s surface into something more dynamic. But how do you go about catching them? Is it all a game of chance and luck? Well, there’s certainly need for patience, but there are a number of things you can do that can really increase you chance of success:

**Anticipation**: Seeing a bird flapping may be your cue to quickly take aim and fire off a sequence of shots – you may get lucky, but in my experience this is not really the best approach. Instead, anticipation is the key. Before a wing flap, a bird will often go through what can be a quite prolonged period of bathing, dunking itself under the water repeatedly, and generally having a good ol’ splash around! This is your sign to focus on this bird. And stick with this bird, unless it assumes the all too familiar “head-tucked” in pose and promptly goes to sleep on you!

**Framing**: A bird does two things when it flaps its wings: it gets tall on the water, and then spreads its wings, thereby getting much larger in the frame. If you want to avoid clipping the wing tips, then you need to be prepared for this, and ensure your focal
length (if using a zoom, then zoom out a little) and/or distance to subject are appropriate such that a bird standing tall with fully extended wings will fit in the frame.

Exposure: Ducks as subjects often present an exposure challenge, featuring bright white plumage through to darks (think of species such as Eider, Harlequin, Long-tailed Duck – all these cover the entire dynamic range that your sensor can likely record). And then the light reflecting off the water tends to fool evaluative metering, which is likely to underexpose the shot as it drags the whites back to mid-gray. I therefore tend to work in manual mode, with an eye on ensuring bright whites are exposed correctly. Now you may say, but the duck is somewhat mid-tone in colouration (think Canvasback or Redhead, or since I’m in Europe, Pochard). But, even if the bird is somewhat mid-tone in overall plumage, when it flaps its wings all of a sudden there will be an explosion of white – the under-wing is typical close to white, there may be a white wing-bar, and then the belly is also white. If you’ve not exposed correctly for bright whites, all these will light up the blinkies on the image preview like a Christmas tree.

Speed: You want a FAST shutter speed. This means, in particular, pushing your ISO. The shots in this article are taken between ISO 2000 and ISO 3200, allowing for a shutter speed in the region of 1/3200th.

By way of some final considerations, you ideally want a bird that’s somewhat isolated, thereby avoiding any distracting out-of-focus individuals in the background, and good sun angle, to ensure even illumination of the head. Think too about light quality – here,
a little cloud cover can be ideal, as clouds are the best diffusers ever, softening the light wonderfully.

Once a bird has finished, do not be too quick to see what you got and take a look at the back of the screen. A bathed duck with its feathers all nicely in order is a happy duck, and a happy duck likes to quack about it!

Martin Sneary is a long-standing birder, passionate conservationist and award-winning photographer. With a special focus on wildlife photography he aims to capture and share moments of exceptional beauty and to help others do the same, passing on his experiences as both a photographer and conservationist. He spent many years working for BirdLife International, in Cambridge, U.K., and Washington D.C, before recently moving to Switzerland with his wife Kelly, where he is now a freelance environmental consultant.

To view more of Martin’s work visit www.natureintheframe.com or his Facebook page at www.facebook.com/martinsnearynaturephotography.